

# An Allegorical Reading of Cormac McCarthy's *Outer Dark*

Renee Williams

Advisor: Dr. Ken Untiedt

College of Liberal and Applied Arts, Department of English

## Background

Though Cormac McCarthy deals with aspects of religion in each of his works, *Outer Dark* stands apart as a complete **theodicy** presented through complex **allegory**. Through his casting of the novel's characters as analogues for Christ, humanity, and Satan, McCarthy comments on the nature and consequences of the **cosmic struggle** between the forces of **good and evil**. McCarthy constructs his theodicy with the incorporation of **Nietzschean philosophy** and a **deistic perspective**.

## Theodicy

Theodicies strive to justify the existence of a good god who permits evil and suffering. The theodicy of *Outer Dark* suggests that, in a world full of evil and suffering, God is not a cure-all. Instead, McCarthy seems to affirm that God has equipped mankind to find grace and with the capacity for goodness, kindness, and compassion.

## Deism

According to Joseph Kelly, "Deists believed in a deity who had created the world but who then withdrew and now had little to do with it... [They] gave no authority to supernatural revelation, considered dogma to be obfuscation, and said that prayer or any other attempt to contact the deity was fruitless" (125). McCarthy's allegory supports a deistic position.

## Nietzschean Philosophy

Carol Kates suggests that "a Nietzschean theodicy would claim that God has created the world exactly the way it is in order to produce morally autonomous agents in Nietzsche's sense: self-conscious moral subjectivists who would, if they had the strength to do so, rebel against God if they... found God morally deficient" (76). McCarthy's apparent belief that God has withdrawn from his creation fits well with a philosophy which takes into account that humanity requires autonomy in order to fully realize its spiritual potential.

## Allegory

While McCarthy's personifications of evil—such as *Outer Dark*'s three mysterious bad men—often garner the bulk of critical attention, one must also seek to understand the allegorical functions of the novel's other characters in order to fully appreciate its theological depth.

- Culla & Rinthy Holme
  - Adam & Eve
  - God
  - Man's Relationship With God
- Baby Holme
  - Humanity
- The Tinker
  - Christ
- The Bearded Man & His Companions
  - Satan/Evil
- The Blind Man
  - The *Übermensch*

## Summary of *Outer Dark*

In this novel, McCarthy describes the birth, abandonment, pursuit, and eventual destruction of an unnamed child. Much of the novel follows the lives of the child's parents, Culla Holme and his sister Rinthy, and their baby is the driving force behind much of the novel's action. After Culla abandons the baby, leaving him in the woods to die, a traveling tinker rescues the baby. Once she discovers what her brother has done, Rinthy sets out on a journey to find the tinker and reclaim her child. Culla pursues Rinthy, and through the course of the novel both siblings encounter a number of strange characters, including McCarthy's personifications of evil, the bearded man and his two companions.

## The Message

*Outer Dark* shows readers that, inevitably, some people will fail to rise above the relative ease of passive evil—like Culla—and some will pursue the grand evil demonstrated by McCarthy's evil trio. However, others, like the blind man, will simply accept that they cannot hope to comprehend God's mystery and cultivate hope and sanctity within themselves.

## Sources

Carr, Duane R. "The Dispossessed White as Naked Ape and Stereotyped Hillbilly in the Southern Novels of Cormac McCarthy." *Midwest Quarterly*, 40.1 (1998): 9-20. *Academic Search Complete*. Web. 14 Nov. 2012.  
Hillier, Russell M. "'In a Dark Parody' of John Bunyan's 'The Pilgrim's Progress': The Presence of Subversive Allegory in Cormac McCarthy's *Outer Dark*." *ANQ* 19.4 (2006): 52-59. *Academic Search Complete*. Web. 16 Nov. 2012.  
Kates, Carol A. "A Nietzschean Theodicy." *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 55.2 (2004): 69-82. *Academic Search Complete*. Web. 15 Nov. 2011.  
Kelly, Joseph F. *The Problem of Evil in the Western Tradition: From the Book of Job to Modern Genetics*. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical P, 2002. Print.  
McCarthy, Cormac. *Outer Dark*. New York: Vintage, 1968. Print.  
Metress, Christopher. "Via Negativa: The Way of Unknowing in Cormac McCarthy's *Outer Dark*." *Southern Review*, 37.1 (2001): 147-54. *Academic Search Complete*. Web. 14 Nov. 2012.  
Spencer, William Christopher. "Incarnations of Evil." *The Extremities of Cormac McCarthy: The Major Character Types*. Diss. University of Tennessee, 1993. Ann Arbor: UMI, 1993. 29-64. *ProQuest Dissertations & Theses*. 15 Nov. 2012.